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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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SUBJECT: Peace Process Update: Norwegian envoy visits;
LTTE official meets leaders; Epicenter of Muslim anger

Refs: Colombo 1975, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

11. (C) This update of Sri Lanka's peace process reviews the following:

-- Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister visits north and south in run-up to second round of talks

-- Senior Tiger negotiator Balasingham continues consultations with leadership

-- New poll highlights strong support for peace process, as well as ethnic divisions

-- The Flavor of the Peace Process: Akkaraipattu, the epicenter of the Muslim meltdown in the east

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Norwegian Envoy Visits
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12. (SBU) Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen is now in Sri Lanka for an October 20-24 visit. During the trip, Helgesen, the chief of the Norwegian peace facilitation effort, will be making stops throughout the island, including Colombo for meetings with GSL officials and the Wanni region in the north for meetings with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In a first during one of his periodic visits, Helgesen also visited Sri Lanka's deep south. In visiting the southern district of Hambantota on October 20, Helgesen called attention to Norway's long-term interest in development of the south. Before proceeding to the Wanni region to meet LTTE leader Prabhakaran and senior negotiator Balasingham (see below), Helgesen also stopped in Jaffna on October 22.

13. (C) In making the visit, Norwegian Embassy political officer Tomas Stangeland told us that Helgesen has three major objectives: (1) To set up an agenda for the second round of peace talks slated to take place in Thailand from October 31 - November 3; (2) To make progress in forming a GSL-LTTE "Joint Task Force" on humanitarian issues; and (3) To cement plans for a conference of donors that will be held in Oslo in late November. Helgesen also planned to discuss the ongoing LTTE-Muslim tensions in the east.

14. (C) COMMENT: As reviewed by Stangeland, Helgesen's agenda is quite an ambitious one, with the Norwegians having to accomplish a lot in very little time. The idea of sending Helgesen to southern Sri Lanka was a solid one and garnered him good press. Amid the discussion about assisting the war-torn north and east, many Sinhalese want to make sure that the underdeveloped south is not forgotten and Helgesen effectively made that point. (Note: Not everyone was impressed; a group of demonstrators from the anti-peace process Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna came out to protest against Helgesen during the Hambantota stop.) (Note: We have heard that Helgesen is annoyed that President Kumaratunga could not meet him because of a "busy schedule.") END COMMENT.

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Senior Tiger Official Meets his Leaders
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15. (C) Since arriving in Sri Lanka on October 15 (see Reftels), the LTTE's London-based senior negotiator Anton Balasingham has reportedly been engaged in numerous meetings with his leadership. Tamil contacts have told us that Balasingham has held long meetings with LTTE leader Prabhakaran and political chief Thamil Chelvan about the peace process. (Note: Thamil Chelvan is reportedly planning to participate in the next round of talks.) The press has also reported that Balasingham

has met with LTTE "Sea Tiger" commander Soosai and other military wing officials, including Colonel Banu. There is no indication whether Balasingham has met with LTTE leaders from the east, such as Paduman from the Trincomalee area, and Karuna from the Batticaloa/Ampara area. Balasingham's wife, Adele, an Australian national who is a member of the LTTE, has also been engaged in meetings focused on women's issues.

16. (C) COMMENT. Little is known about the LTTE's inner dynamics, but Balasingham is considered by most observers to be more in favor of the peace process than some others in the group. Apropos of this point, most of Balasingham's meetings seem to have been held in the town of Mullaitivu where much of the military leadership is believed to spend time, as opposed to Kilinochchi, the nominal headquarters of the LTTE. This may indicate that he is lobbying military officials, some of whom are reportedly very concerned about the direction of the peace process. It would be positive if he also met members of the eastern leadership, as it is from that area where many problems arise, especially with Muslims (see Paras 9-10, for example). END COMMENT.

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Poll re Peace Process
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17. (U) The latest tracking poll by the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a well-regarded local think-tank, reported the following key findings:

- Overwhelming public support for the peace process continues.
- A majority of Sri Lankans continue to approve of Norway's role as peace facilitator.
- There has been a steady decline in the belief that the LTTE "goes in for talks to fool the people."
- There has been a steady increase in the number of people who believe that the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) is not "effective." Many Sinhalese hold this view, while Tamils generally do not.
- The vast majority of Tamils say that the LTTE is the "sole representative" of the Tamil community, an assertion rejected by most Sinhalese.
- Most Sri Lankans do not believe that the LTTE should be left in control of an interim administration set up for the north and east. The majority of Sinhalese and Muslims are opposed to LTTE control, while most Tamils are in favor.

(Note: We are faxing the CPA poll results to SA/INS. Mission will also provide SA/INS the results of a recent poll it commissioned regarding Sri Lankans attitudes toward the U.S.)

18. (C) COMMENT: The poll's findings essentially confirm what we have heard anecdotally, i.e., there is widespread support for the peace process. It has also long been said that there is a chasm dividing Tamil and Sinhalese perceptions, with the latter group somewhat more skeptical toward the process mainly due to concerns regarding the LTTE. The poll tends to bear this out. In any case, the poll indicates there is close to zero support for a return to war even among the skeptics. END COMMENT.

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Muslim Meltdown in Akkaraipattu
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19. (C) In this edition of the flavor of the peace process, Mission turns the spotlight on the town of Akkaraipattu in the eastern district of Ampara. Of late, Akkaraipattu has been the epicenter of much of the anger that many eastern Muslims feel toward the peace process (see Reftels). (Note: Akkaraipattu has about 35,000 residents of which over 90 percent are Muslim.) Earlier in the month, for example, fighting broke out between police and Tamils near the town leaving seven dead. This incident led to Muslim and Tamil clashes in the town. In addition, after Muslims were abducted purportedly by the LTTE, clashes broke out on the outskirts of the town between Muslims and Tamils last week, which led the government to impose a curfew for several days. There has also reportedly been some Muslim extremist activity in the area, including reports that A.L.M. Athaullah, an MP from Akkaraipattu, was involved in stirring things up. (Note: Athaullah has recently been at odds with the leader of his party, Rauf Hakeem of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, over the peace process -- see Reftel.)

10. (C) COMMENT: Clues as to why Akkaraipattu is so tense are not hard to find. The town is surrounded by Tamil communities, leaving the pocket of Muslims in

Akkaraipattu feeling isolated and vulnerable. When Mission team visited the town in June, it met with many Muslims who were extremely worried that the government's peace initiative was a "sell out" to the LTTE (see Reftels). Despite the government's best efforts, every indication is that this feeling is stronger than ever. In an October 23 meeting, for example, Chandra Nehru, a Tamil National Alliance MP from near the town, told us that the situation in the Akkaraipattu area remained extremely tense and was even explosive. END COMMENT.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

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